

Philip Pullman's Other Trilogy: An Overview of the Sally Lockhart Mysteries

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When considering the four novels that feature Sally Lockhart, in one capacity or another, a question is often raised as to whether the books in the series, *Ruby in the Smoke* (1985), *Shadow in the Plate* (1986)/*Shadow in the North* (1987), and *Tiger in the Well* (1990), referred to as the Sally Lockhart Mysteries, are a trilogy or a tetralogy, because, as we know, Sally appears in a fourth book, *The Tin Princess* (1994), that features many of the same characters. The author, in at least one place, www.philip-pullman.com, calls the books a quartet, which, as a musical term rather than a literary one, does not actually answer the question.

Another question is: To what literary genre do the books belong? Certainly they are mysteries, but are they fiction, historical fiction, or something else? Here it might depend on whether one is looking at the first three books opposed to the last. Pullman says they are historical thrillers, but that does not answer the question directly either.

The dates that Pullman provides at the beginning of each book, 1872, 1878, 1881, and 1882, respectively, clearly places them in the Victorian era, and there are certainly more, much more, than sufficient, accurate references to historical events, inventions, social concerns, and the like from the Victorian period, but one cannot, in my estimation, assume that the books are historical fiction in the usual sense. The characters, particularly Sally, have not been placed in the historical time or at an historic event to illuminate that time and/or event for us. They, and Sally in particular, would have changed that history if they had.

For example, if Sally had actually lived at the time of Victoria, she would have made history herself, much as the suffragettes, or Rosa Parks, or the bra burners did in their eras. Sally is a modern woman, not modern for the time in which she lived on the page, but every bit a modern woman if she lived in ours. With her business sense, her financial acumen, her sound reasoning, and her ability to make her way alone in the world in the third book as a single mother, not to mention her proficiency with a pistol, she would be right at home with the protagonists of present day movies, novels, and television serials. If anything, I do not consider her Victorian.

Each of the books has a definite connection with acting, drama, plays, scenes, and the theater. *Ruby in the Smoke* actually began as a play and was later rewritten as a novel. In it, Rosa, the sister of Frederick Garland, the photographer who befriends Sally, is an actress, and Sally in an effort to put the Garland photography business and studio on a more firm footing, suggests that they stage scenes to be photographed as stereographs and sold as sets. Likewise, in *Shadow in the North*, Jim Taylor, whom we first meet as a Cockney-tongued errand boy at the offices of Selby and Lockhart, spends a great deal of time at the theater, predominantly backstage, and tries his hand at writing melodramas, much like the penny dreadfuls he is fond of reading in the previous book. In this same book one of the central characters, Alistair

Mackinnon, a conjurer, who himself disappears, is known as “The Wizard of the North.” Another figure is Nellie Budd who conducts séances in her home that border on the dramatic.

It is *The Tin Princess*, however, that opens much like a play script. Just after the dedicatory page, one finds the sort listing that one would find at the beginning of a play, with each character named and described in the order in which they appear. Even the spy that Jim and his gang of Irish urchins pursue turns out to be an actress. Pullman is a playwright, as well as a novelist, and is obviously as fond of melodramas as Jim, and I quote:

Actually, I wrote each one with a genuine cliché of melodrama right at the heart of it, on purpose: the priceless jewel with a curse on it—the madman with a weapon that could destroy the world—the situation of being trapped in a cellar with the water rising—the little illiterate servant girl from the slums of London who becomes a princess. (28)

The one who plays a central role in all four books is Jim Taylor, not Sally, and it was not until I remembered the theme of this conference that I realized how remarkably Pullman had transformed Jim from a Cockney office boy to a refined, gentleman detective, capable of winning the hand of a queen, albeit one without a kingdom by the end of the fourth book. His speech alone, if not his dress, bears me out. At the opening of *Ruby in the Smoke*, his “What d’yer want?” and “In ‘ere” betrays his origins as well as his description:

...a young boy appeared, like a sudden solidification of all the grime in the city air. His jacket was torn in three places, his collar had come adrift from his shirt, and his hair looked as if it had be used for an experiment with powers of electricity. (4)

Evidence of his transformation in no more than ten years is rather remarkable, at least equal to the work of Henry Higgins with Eliza. As he encounters Becky Winter, who has been hired to teach Miss Bevan, that is Adelaide Bevan, who has recently married Prince Rudolph of Razkavia, we hear, “Excuse me, miss.” ... “Do you happen to know the young lady who lives in this house?”

He was in his early twenties, with a vivid, intelligent expression, green eyes, and hair the same color as his hat. There was an air about him she couldn’t quite place: He was a gentleman, to judge by his appearance, but something about his confident manner spoke of acquaintance with stables, and stage doors, and low public houses. (3)

You can take the boy out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the boy. But enough of looking points of comparison and contrast, allow me to introduce you properly to Sally and her mysteries:

On a cold, fretful, afternoon in early October, 1872, a hansom cap drew up outside The offices of Lockhart and Selby, Shipping Agents, in the financial heart of London, and a young girl got out and paid the driver.

She was a person of sixteen or so—alone, and uncommonly pretty. She was slender, and pale, and dressed in mourning, with a black bonnet under which she tucked

back a straying twist of blond hair that the wind had teased loose. She had unusually dark brown eyes for one so fair. Her name was Sally Lockhart; and within fifteen minutes, she was going to kill a man. (3)

So begins the first book in the Sally Lockhart mysteries. This is so startling and memorable an opening that Michael Dirda, book reviewer for the *Washington Post*, was able to recall it in its entirety when I answered his “What was the latest book that you read?” question and explained that I was preparing this presentation. Michael is the author in residence at my undergraduate institution, McDaniel College, formerly Western Maryland College, which is located in Westminster, MD, where I have recently moved to live in pre-retirement, and I had the pleasure of eating my dessert with him during a recent reunion weekend dinner.

Sally’s father, Matthew Lockhart, found it necessary to go to the Far East to look into certain discrepancies in reports from his shipping firm’s agents and had died only three months before aboard the schooner *Lavinia* when it sank in the South China Sea. We meet Sally when she arrives at her father’s offices to ask her father’s former partner, Mr. Selby, what he might know about a mysterious message that she received only that morning, forwarded by her father’s lawyer. It is obviously from her father, but not, by the look of the writing and the spelling, in her father’s hand.

SALI BEWARE OF THE
SEVEN BLESSINGS
MARCHBANKS WILL HELP
CHATTUM
BEWARE DARLING

With Mr. Selby away, the porter instructs a young boy, whose name we later learn is Jim Taylor, to show her to his office to speak to his secretary, a Mr. Higgs. Her inquiry about anyone by the name of Marchbanks brings no response, but when she mentions the Seven Blessings, Mr. Higgs falls dead at her feet in terror. I make special mention of Jim here, for it is he, as a Cockney-tongued ruffian, reader of penny dreadfuls, as I mentioned before, who is a major character in all four books in the series, not Sally. She makes only a cameo appearance in book four.

We soon learn that nothing is as it seems, and almost nothing too unusual can happen to a young woman of her age, living in the time in which she lived. The agent in the Far East whom her father trusted, a Dutchman named Van Eden, is far from trustworthy. He has, in fact, killed her father and arranged for the sinking of the *Lavinia* as a cover up. In the end, Sally is forced to shoot him. The man that Sally has always known as her father is not. A treacherous woman, who runs a boarding house and harbors the only survivor from the *Lavinia*, who is the man who sent Sally her mysterious message, keeps him and a waif named Adelaide virtual prisoners in her lodgings but once was attractive enough to gain the attention of a maharajah. It is that maharajah’s ruby, rightfully Sally’s by inheritance, that this woman, Mrs. Holland, is determined to own at any cost.

What of Sally? She has since childhood been plagued by frightening nightmares. Her father is dead, but she cannot continue to live with her aunt and be free to unravel the mystery in which she is involved. If her father’s lawyer learns that she is no longer there, she knows he will

make her a ward of the court, so she cannot go to him for money. She, ultimately, receives a letter from Major Marchbanks in Kent, but when she goes to visit him, he is in fear of his life and hastily gives her a journal that he tells her will explain everything. Regrettably, it is stolen from her before she has a chance to read it, and she subsequently learns that the Major has been murdered. What is she to do?

Fortunately, on the way to the house in Kent, she encountered a photographer, who, on her return, conceals her from a woman who appears to be pursuing her and gives her his card. Several days later, with no one else to turn to, she hails a cab and goes to 45 Burton Street. The casting for the main characters of the series is complete. Sally moves in with Frederick Garland, his sister Rosa, the actress, and the others who live at their studio and home, including Adelaide until she is kidnapped at the end of the book. In a short time she has the Garlands' finances in order, offers numerous suggestions on how to run the business more efficiently, including making sets stereographs to be used in the stereoscopes that they can sell and are so popular at that time, and receives proposals of marriage from Frederick, which she politely refuses, being essentially unwilling to give up her independence. Have you been able to follow all this? Does Sally sound like a Victorian woman? I think not.

Similar to the first book in the series, the second opens six years later in 1878 with the report of a ship lost at sea. This time it is the steamship, *Ingrid Linde*, "the pride of the Anglo-Baltic shipping line" (3) that vanishes between Hamburg to Riga with "a cargo of machine parts and a passenger or two" (3). As in the previous work, it is this shipping disaster that sets the plot in motion. Sally still resides at 45 Bolton Street along with an ever-changing cast of characters, and has used a portion of the money Colonel Lockhart left her to become part owner and continue to influence and manage the now prospering photographic shop and studio of Garland and Lockhart. In addition, she has established her own business as S. Lockhart, Financial Consultant and advises clients, particularly women, on investments. As a result of the loss of the *Lavinia* and other consequences leading to the collapse of its parent company, one of her clients has lost most of her life's savings, and Sally, determined to find out why, ultimately comes face to face with the industrialist Axel Bellmann, whose invention and the use to which he intends to put it is truly frightening.

As the series progresses, the premise on which the story is based becomes less and less believable. *Tiger in the Well*, set in the autumn of 1881, stretches my ability to suspend disbelief. Sally, a single mother, at home with her twenty-one month old daughter, Harriett, is served with papers that the child's father is suing her for custody, citing Sally as an unfit parent. Now all this is plausible, except for the fact that the child's father is dead, and Sally has never heard of the man who claims to be her estranged husband. As the story progresses, she learns that there is both marriage and birth certificates proving the man's claim, and with even the law against her, she is forced to disguise herself and work as a servant in the house of her accuser to attempt to determine his motive. The outcome of this novel is truly amazing, but you will have to read it for yourself.

No matter what he might say, I have a sneaking suspicion that *The Tin Princess* was an afterthought. The denouement for the series to this point fails. At the end of the *Tiger in the Well*, all the loose ends from the original three books are not tied up. What happened to

Adelaide, the little girl who disappears at the end of *Ruby in the Smoke*? She is the one significant character who had not been accounted for when the Sally Lockhart trilogy is complete. In making her the protagonist of the fourth book, Pullman himself says that he places her in the most unlikely setting he could think of. Frankly, *The Tin Princess* reads more like a fairy tale, where the humble miller's daughter meets a prince, marries him, and becomes a princess.

The year is 1882, the year after the events of *Tiger in the Well* and ten years after the initial events in *Ruby in the Smoke*. Sally, now married to Daniel Goldberg, a political journalist, is preparing to leave for an extended trip to America where he "intends to study labor relations in Chicago, and [she] want[s] to look at the stock market in New York" (25). I reiterate this is not exactly what would be expected of a Victorian young woman, particularly a wife in the Victorian era.

Adelaide in the intervening years, has had to find what work she can, eventually in the world's oldest profession, in the care of a Mrs. Catlett. As she relates her past to Jim,

... one day this German nobleman come in with a party of friends. He was showing them around, like tourists. One of 'em was the prince. I could tell he was uncomfortable, he didn't want that kind of thing, but he was nice and we just talked, and ... I supposed he fell in love there and then. He aint' had much affection, poor thing. So anyway, he paid Mrs. Catlett a lot of money for taking me away, like and he set me up here. And then we was married. He wouldn't take no for an answer. (37)

A fairy tale, pure and simple.

Ultimately those who wish Razkavia taken over by its neighboring country, kill off all those who in the kingdom would be rightful rulers, including Prince, actually King, Rudolf, and Adelaide becomes their queen. Through a number of amazing twists and turns, Adelaide loses the kingdom but gains Jim, so all is not lost after all.

Now we have come full circle. Are these books a trilogy or a tetralogy? While I could continue to offer evidence from one or more of the novels, I will instead provide some unscientific, empirical, and certainly not literary, evidence. In looking at the covers of the first three recently reissued paperbacks published by Dell Laurel-Leaf in 2004, one finds the words "A SALLY LOCKHART MYSTERY" at the bottom of each. The wording on the cover of the fourth book, however, states instead, "Featuring characters from the SALLY LOCKHART MYSTERIES." Of course, one cannot tell a book by its cover, so let us look at the books from another angle. As anyone who has read the C. S Lewis space trilogy—*Out of a Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*—or even J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, the books that belong to the original set in many cases become progressively longer and physically thicker. *The Tin Princess* fails in this aspect also, for it is longer and thicker than *Ruby in the Smoke*, but not as long or as thick as *Shadow in the North*, certainly nowhere near as thick as *Tiger in the Well*.

Although they have not been forthcoming, for more than a decade has passed while Pullman devoted his time and energy to writing the three books in the His Dark Materials series, he hints that there are more stories about Adelaide and Jim and the other characters, especially Sally. We will have to wait and see.

Works Cited

- Pullman, Philip. *The Ruby in the Smoke*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.
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